



## Family Engagement Insider

Digest 3 | March 2021

# Professional Learning Plays a Central Role in Working Effectively with Diverse Families

Continuous learning and dedicated time for practice and reflection empower educators to partner effectively with families.

### Do Families Love and Recommend Your School?

There are few things as rewarding for educators as being part of a school that families love. Building a school that families love comes down to effective leadership and cultivating a family engagement approach in which both educators and staff are:

- **Committed:** They fully focus on understanding and helping families achieve their goals for their children and embrace these goals as their own.
- **Collaborative:** They actively and authentically engage families as full partners to help students achieve learning goals.
- **Responsive:** They anticipate families' priorities and needs, respond quickly to concerns, and communicate effectively.
- **Respectful:** They treat every family as worthy and important, and acknowledge diverse perspectives and varying abilities.

To meet these expectations, educators and staff will require ongoing formal and informal professional learning and capacity-development opportunities.

### Professional Learning Can Help Build an Equitable Approach to Family Engagement

Although opportunity gaps for students of color and students from low-income families continue to persist, evidence shows that family engagement plays a central part in eliminating these inequities.<sup>i</sup>

In Delaware, students and families come from increasingly diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. To create successful school-family partnerships, teacher professional development needs to focus on serving diverse families and bringing fresh strategies to equip teachers with new knowledge and skills. Professional learning topics can include:

- Exploring personal assumptions and core beliefs about families
- Addressing systemic inequity and its impacts on students and families
- Building relationships and trust with families as a prerequisite for partnerships
- Promoting positive two-way communication with families
- Identifying family strengths to support positive student outcomes

### Delaware's pre-K-12 student population includes:

- 79,933 students of color (57% of all students)
- 36,994 students eligible for the federal lunch program (26% of all students)
- 23,202 students with disabilities (16% of all students)
- 13,261 English Learners (10% of all students)<sup>ii</sup>

## A Need for Professional Learning Focused on Family Engagement

Effective family engagement often constitutes a big shift in mindset and practice for teachers. But, many have never had access to professional learning focused on family engagement. In fact, a national teacher survey showed that many teachers lack knowledge and skills to meaningfully and effectively engage families in student learning.<sup>iii</sup>

It is crucial for teachers to continue to learn and practice family engagement skills throughout their careers because:

- Family engagement is a significant part of student success.
- Higher levels of family engagement are associated with higher job satisfaction among teachers.
- Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where they have good relationships with families.<sup>iv</sup>

## Continuously Developing and Improving Educators' Family Engagement Skills

Districts and schools should aim to continuously develop and improve the family engagement skills and abilities of their leaders and teachers over time. You can do this through a layered approach throughout the school year that provides professional learning, planning time for teachers, opportunities to practice engaging with families, and time for reflection and feedback after family meetings. Below are ideas you can use to structure family engagement professional learning, capacity development, and coordinated support over time.

### Start the year with professional learning focused on the following high-impact family engagement strategies:

- » Developing relationships and trust with families
- » Sharing and discussing student progress data with families
- » Modeling effective teaching practices so families can use them at home
- » Aligning family engagement activities with school improvement goals

### Each quarter, set aside time for teacher planning and personalized family outreach:

- » Grade-level teams plan their family engagement activities, which are aligned to student learning needs.
- » For their family engagement events, teachers select key grade-level content, relevant student data to share with families, and activities to model for families to use at home.
- » Teachers drive two-way communication and personally invite families to participate in grade-level events.

### Each quarter, teachers facilitate family engagement events focused on student learning:

- » Teachers facilitate family meetings — informed by data and driven by relevant grade-level content — that are dynamic, inclusive, and developmental.
- » School leaders observe family meetings when possible, and debrief with teachers about their experiences.
- » Teachers follow up with families not in attendance to share what they missed.

i Caspe M., Lopez, E., Chu, A., & Weiss, H.B.(2011). Teaching the teachers: Preparing educators to engage families for student learning. *Harvard Family Research Project Issue Brief*. <https://archive.globalfrp.org/early-childhood-education/publications-resources/teaching-the-teachers-preparing-educators-to-engage-families-for-student-achievement>

ii Delaware Department of Education. (2020). *Annual reports*. <https://www.doe.k12.de.us/domain/167>

iii Markow, D., Macia, L., & Lee, H. (2012). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Challenges for school leadership*. MetLife.

iv Patton, C. & Wanless, S. (2013). Professional development in family engagement: A few often-overlooked strategies for success. *Family Involvement Network of Educators (FINE) Newsletter*, 5(4). [https://archive.globalfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/professional-development-in-family-engagement-a-few-often-overlooked-strategies-for-success#\\_ftnref2](https://archive.globalfrp.org/family-involvement/publications-resources/professional-development-in-family-engagement-a-few-often-overlooked-strategies-for-success#_ftnref2)